

Decision Notice
and
Finding of No Significant Impact
Seward to Girdwood Iditarod National Historic Trail

**USDA Forest Service
Region 10, Alaska Region
Seward and Glacier Ranger Districts
Chugach National Forest**

Decision and Reasons for the Decision

Summary of Decision

After careful consideration of the potential impacts of the alternatives analyzed in the Seward to Girdwood Iditarod National Historic Trail (INHT) Environmental Assessment (EA) and the issues and comments raised by the public through public involvement efforts and recent Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) hearings, I have decided to implement Alternative 4 with minor modifications. This decision would provide for both yearlong nonmotorized and winter motorized opportunities from Seward to Girdwood. Consistent with ANILCA Section 1110(a), this decision allows for snowmachine use during periods of adequate snow cover for traditional activities on the INHT that connects Seward to Girdwood. I have also decided to separate winter motorized and nonmotorized uses to the extent possible and protect the values of quiet, solitude, air quality, uninterrupted nonmotorized recreation, safety, and views of pristine landscapes by reasonably regulating 81 miles of parallel alternative routes for nonmotorized use.

One of the key issues I considered when making my decision is how we manage the trail in accordance with ANILCA Section 1110(a), which generally states that the Secretary shall permit, on conservation system units the use of snowmachines (during periods of adequate snow cover) for traditional activities and for travel to and from villages and homesites. Such use shall be subject to reasonable regulations by the Secretary to protect the natural and other values of the conservation system units and shall not be prohibited unless, after notice and hearing in the vicinity of the affected unit or area, the Secretary finds that such use would be detrimental to the resource values of the unit or area. We gave public notice and conducted two hearings to collect public testimony consistent with ANILCA. I heard a variety of perspectives from the public and believe my decision addresses many of the concerns expressed. This decision allows for a continuous route from Seward to Girdwood that is open to snowmachines. This decision also protects the values of quiet, solitude, air quality, uninterrupted nonmotorized recreation, safety, and views of pristine landscapes by regulating uses on 81 miles of parallel alternative routes for nonmotorized use.

I extensively and carefully reviewed the information from the interdisciplinary team (IDT) about a nonmotorized alternative. The IDT looked at opportunities to develop a completely nonmotorized alternative but there were no feasible opportunities within direction set in the Forest Plan. Any reasonable nonmotorized route would go through areas that are currently open to snowmachine use. Additionally, a completely nonmotorized alternative would still need to meet the requirements of Section 1110(a) of ANILCA, which would require a finding of

detriment to resource values to prohibit snowmachine use for traditional activities. Since the analysis for the revised Forest Plan recently showed that snowmachines were an appropriate use in some of these areas, we could not reasonably find that a detriment to resource values would occur in these areas with this project. In addition, the areas have traditionally included motorized uses, and much of the trail is along highways and railways. I believe that a completely nonmotorized alternative is not a reasonable alternative for these reasons. I also believe the decisions made in the Forest Plan are appropriate, which is why I base this decision on direction set in the Forest Plan.

Background

The National Trails Act, as amended in 1978, designated the INHT from Seward to Nome, Alaska, across multiple federal, state, municipal and private lands. The Bureau of Land Management, identified as the Trail Administrator for the INHT, led an extensive multi-agency/partner effort to develop the Iditarod National Historic Trail Seward to Nome Route Comprehensive Management Plan (Comprehensive Plan), published in 1986. The Comprehensive Plan provides guidelines for the protection, development and management of the Primary Route and Connecting Trails and for associated heritage resources along the entire length of the INHT.

Since 1986, several trail segments have been planned, constructed or reconstructed along the Seward-Girdwood INHT route by various federal, state, or other entities, primarily near or through the communities of Seward and Girdwood, based on Comprehensive Plan recommendations. Several advisory councils, advocacy groups, and potential partners have assisted in conceptual planning and route location for segments of the Seward-Girdwood INHT.

With this background, the Forest Service developed the following purpose and need for action that is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan and the Chugach National Forest Revised Land and Resource Management Plan of May 2002 (Forest Plan):

Purpose and Need

- Validate, refine, and implement selected Comprehensive Plan recommendations for a National Historic Trail within the Chugach National Forest boundary and connecting Seward to Girdwood at Crow Pass Trail.
- Identify existing and proposed INHT trail segments stemming from the Comprehensive Plan, crossing various land ownerships and connecting Seward with Girdwood.
- Facilitate a coordinated approach for completing route selection and obtaining permanent easements; identifying managed trail uses; preserving and interpreting heritage resources; constructing or reconstructing INHT trail, recreation and support facilities; and identifying and incorporating appropriate economic development opportunities.
- Develop and manage the INHT in concert with associated legislation, guidelines and plans identified for and by adjacent landowners and managers.

Key Issues Identified During Scoping

A proposal to reestablish the Seward to Girdwood INHT was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping from November 26, 2002 to December 27, 2002. From scoping, two interrelated issues were identified. The first issue relates to Section 1110 of the ANILCA, and the use of snowmachines on the INHT. Section 1110, among other things, allows snowmachine use during periods of adequate snow cover for traditional activities within a

“Conservation System Unit” (CSU). Any unit in Alaska of the National Trails System, such as the routes designated as the INHT, is a CSU and Section 1110 will apply. Section 1110 therefore requires that the Seward-Girdwood INHT trail routes permit snowmachine use for traditional activities during periods of adequate snow cover. Since the INHT trail routes cross through areas with nonmotorized prescriptions in the Forest Plan, there is an inherent conflict with the Forest Plan.

Interrelated with this issue is the potential for user conflicts between motorized and nonmotorized recreation including the displacement, disruption, and/or negative effects on user experiences, as well as potential safety issues. During scoping, concerns were expressed that the proposal did not provide an equitable distribution between motorized and nonmotorized recreation trail use. The majority of comments raised by the public related to winter motorized/nonmotorized uses.

The EA documents the analysis of four alternatives that address the key issues.

ANILCA Section 1110(a)

As noted above, Section 1110(a) of ANILCA requires that the Forest Service permit, on CSUs, the use of snowmachines, during periods of adequate snow cover, for traditional activities and for travel to and from villages and homesites. Consistent with the Alaska Regional Supplement to Forest Service Manual (FSM) Section 2326.1, traditional activities include, but are not limited to, recreation activities such as fishing, hunting, boating, sightseeing, and hiking. Such snowmachine use is, however, subject to reasonable regulation to protect the natural and other values of the CSUs and cannot be prohibited unless, after notice and hearing in the vicinity of the affected unit or area, the Forest Service finds that such use would be detrimental to the resource values of the unit or area.

The Forest Service has determined that the natural and other values of the INHT to be protected are quiet, solitude, air quality, uninterrupted nonmotorized recreation, views of pristine landscapes and public safety. These values were identified by the public during scoping, the hearings, and through the revision of the Forest Plan.

Where it has been determined that there are natural and other values of the CSU to be protected, the Forest Service believes one means of reasonably regulating snowmachine use on the INHT is to provide alternative parallel routes for snowmachine use. These alternative routes will offer a comparable experience for winter motorized users by providing a continuous through-route open to snowmachines and allowing snowmachine users to capture the Iditarod experience. Snowmachine users will not be bypassing any exceptional natural features such as scenic vistas, historic sites, or unique recreational facilities that would be available only to nonmotorized trail users. Not only will such alternative parallel routes provide a similar recreation experience, the alternate routes will protect the identified values of the CSU, including public safety by limiting conflicts between different types of users.

Management Considerations of Alternative Routes

Alternatives 2 and 4, as described in the EA, include nonmotorized routes. Due to the conflict with the requirements of ANILCA Section 1110 and the potential to prohibit snowmachine use on these routes, we gave public notice and conducted two hearings in the vicinity of the affected area (Girdwood and Moose Pass). We collected public testimony related to snowmachine use

for traditional activities, potential access restrictions, the possible prohibition of snowmachine use, and whether such use for traditional activities is detrimental to resource values.

Section 1110(a) provides that snowmachine use during periods of adequate snow cover is subject to reasonable regulations to protect the natural and other values of the CSU. Such use cannot be prohibited unless, after notice and hearing, there is a finding that such use would be detrimental to the resource values of the unit or area. Based on comments through public testimony and input from resource specialists, I have determined that most of the routes included in Alternatives 2 and 4 will be available for snowmachine use for traditional activities as defined in the Alaska Regional Supplement to FSM 2326.1. In certain areas, however, reasonable regulations will be implemented to provide alternative routes for the protection of natural and other values of the CSU and public safety. The alternative routes and the natural and other values to be protected are described below, section-by-section.

Bear Lake Area: This is a short segment of trail (1/2 mile) along the east side of Bear Lake. It is an existing trail and is not suitable for snowmachines due to steep sidehills and canyons, rugged terrain, and narrow tread. Using a snowmachine on this trail is impractical and hazardous due to the likelihood of snowmachines rolling down the hill rather than staying on the trail. Even with extensive field searches, no suitable location for a snowmachine trail could be found, other than a route across Bear Lake. Alternatives 2 and 4 include a winter motorized route across Bear Lake, which is a safer and more suitable route for snowmachine use. The Bear Lake route is also the traditional winter route.

Grayling Lake Area: This segment of trail is approximately 8 miles long and it extends north from the existing Grayling Lakes trail system. The segment goes through a small and narrow area closed under the Forest Plan. Because the closure area is so small and narrow, a motorized corridor here could potentially change the setting and character of this area and would not provide recreationists with a suitable setting for a nonmotorized recreational experience. Uses are regulated here to protect the quiet, solitude, air quality, uninterrupted nonmotorized recreation, safety, and views of pristine landscapes. Since the Forest Plan has been recently revised with tremendous public input in identifying motorized and nonmotorized areas, it would be important to protect these values by keeping this area, including the proposed trail, as nonmotorized. It is also important to provide a section of trail where people can recreate in a nonmotorized setting during the winter. This area extends north from the popular cross-country skiing area around Goldenfin Lake, and would provide an opportunity for a high quality system of ski trails connected to this existing system.

In Alternative 4 the Lost Lake/Primrose trail would be included to provide a comparable alternate route to this nonmotorized section. Recreationists using this alternate motorized route would not be excluded from any unique features of the INHT. The Lost Lake/Primrose Trail is a popular winter snowmachine trail and is substantially similar to the nonmotorized route. This trail begins in spruce/hemlock forests, similar to the Grayling lake section, but climbs slightly higher in elevation, where the vegetation becomes more open, improving the snowmachine opportunities. Concerns were raised by the public that sections of the Lost Lake/Primrose trail are difficult for the average snowmachine user. However, the nonmotorized section also contains steep and difficult terrain similar to the Lost Lake/Primrose trail.

Alternative 4 also includes a winter route over Kenai Lake that connects the Lost Lake/Primrose trail to the rest of the INHT. The portion of the INHT that is parallel to the Kenai Lake route is also open to snowmachines, but it contains steep sidehills and is generally not a desirable trail for snowmachine use. The winter route over Kenai Lake is more suitable for snowmachine use and

provides a better connection for a continuous motorized through route. Although concerns were raised that Kenai Lake rarely freezes over, information from local residences and information compiled by the Seward Ranger District indicates that in general Kenai Lake has frozen over regularly for the past 20 years with the exception of the last 2 years.

Turnagain Pass Area: According to the winter recreation report completed for the 2000-2001 season¹, the Turnagain Pass area has the most concentrated backcountry winter use in the State and normally receives 250 to 300 recreationists during an average weekend day. Winter use counts over the past three seasons shows that the distribution of use averages approximately 57% motorized users and 42% nonmotorized users. A closure order on the east side of the Seward Highway, which has been in place since the mid 1970's or longer, has established an historical pattern of use with motorized users on the west side of the highway and nonmotorized users on the east side of the highway. The proposed nonmotorized trail is located in the closure area in an extremely popular, high-quality winter backcountry nonmotorized recreation area. Keeping this area, including the trail, nonmotorized would protect the established pattern of use and the value of uninterrupted nonmotorized recreation. It would also avoid safety concerns from potential collisions between skiers and snowmachines. This type of safety hazard would be high in this area due to the high concentration of nonmotorized recreational use. In addition, it would be difficult to limit motorized use to the trail, because of the open, non-forested condition in much of Turnagain Pass, further increasing the potential for chance encounters and collisions.

Alternatives 2 and 4 provide a comparable alternate route on the west side of the Seward Highway, which is an existing popular snowmachine use area. The motorized route is very comparable to the nonmotorized route because they all parallel the Seward Highway and there are equal parking facilities for both user groups.

Portage Valley: In Portage Valley, the route for snowmachines is located along the Portage Highway corridor (up to the tunnel to Whittier), which has been a route traditionally used in this area because of its geographic location. The valley is fairly narrow, and has Portage Creek and Portage highway restricting the readily accessible land base to an even narrower corridor. In order to safely separate motorized from nonmotorized users, the motorized route would need to remain adjacent to the Portage Highway.

The parallel alternate nonmotorized route in Portage Valley (up to the Begich-Boggs Visitor Center) would be managed for groomed skiing opportunities in the winter. This nonmotorized route would protect the values of quiet, solitude, air quality, uninterrupted cross-country skiing, safety, and views of pristine landscapes. It would also provide the only groomed cross-country skiing opportunities on the Glacier Ranger District.

From the Visitor Center over to Whittier, the INHT crosses Portage Lake and then is routed on the Portage Pass trail. Portage Lake has been closed to motorized use since the mid 1970's or before, which established a pattern of nonmotorized use. Also, crossing Portage Lake in the winter would present safety concerns that would be shared by nonmotorized users (such as ice/icebergs, avalanche), but would increase nonmotorized safety concerns to avoid the fast-moving machines. Keeping Portage Lake nonmotorized protects the values of quiet, solitude, air quality, safety, and views of pristine landscapes. Travel over Portage Pass trail would also be dangerous due to avalanche hazards and extreme high winds over the Pass.

¹ Skustad, C. 2001. Glacier Ranger District 2000-01 Winter Recreation Report. Forest Service, Chugach National Forest, Glacier Ranger District, Girdwood, Alaska. 19 pp.

Twentymile Valley: In the Twentymile valley, the proposed INHT would be managed for summer use only. This summer trail would be a narrow tread (18") cut into fairly steep side slopes, and in many cases along cliff bands. The clearing limits would be approximately three feet through the forest. In some places, the trail would traverse a closed canopy forest. This area would not provide a good trail for winter travel as the forest canopy would intercept most of the snow, and the narrow tread width across the steep side slopes would not be adequate for a snowmachine to maneuver. Skiers could potentially use this width with difficulty. Constructing this trail to allow snowmachine use would require clearing it to 10' and constructing a bench across the side slopes (some exceeding 60%), which would mean extensive cuts and fills. These cut and fill areas would have a high potential to erode, or cause mass wasting of the slope, potentially causing a detriment to water and soil resources. Several miles up into Twentymile valley, and through the pass area, the proposed route crosses many alder covered avalanche run out zones. Winter travel would be easier in these areas, but far more hazardous. Although avalanche hazards exist in many areas of the Chugach National Forest, the proposed summer trail crosses a particularly hazardous area because it crosses a large frequency of avalanche paths. This is one reason why the area is not managed for winter use. The center of the valley provides better and much safer winter travel opportunities. The Forest Plan closed the valley floor for approximately four miles to general snowmachine use, but allowed a corridor through the area to access the upper valley. For winter users, nonmotorized recreationists can travel practically anywhere on the valley. Snowmachine users of the INHT can use the corridor. This alternate route is away from avalanche run out areas and provides a much safer and enjoyable winter travel route than the summer trail.

Girdwood Area: In the Girdwood area, land ownership and jurisdiction are complex. A municipal ordinance prohibits snowmachine use within the municipal boundaries, establishing a pattern of nonmotorized use. The INHT includes several miles of trail outside the National Forest boundary where snowmachine use would be prohibited, consistent with the municipal ordinance. However, there are three sections of trail within the National Forest. These include the last mile of Crow Creek road ending at the trailhead and the Crow Pass trail up to the National Forest boundary; two miles of trail adjacent to Crow Creek Road within the National Forest Boundary; and the Winner Creek Trail located on a federal easement across municipality and State of Alaska lands. In all three locations, there is no legal access for snowmachines. There is no place to trailer a snowmachine, off-load it and snowmachine to the trail without crossing areas closed by municipal ordinance. Even if snowmachine access could occur, there are natural and other values to be protected from such use. On the Winner Creek Trail portion, pedestrians use a hand tram to cross Glacier Creek, which is in a steep-sided gorge. Not only would the interaction with pedestrians raise public safety concerns by allowing snowmachine use on this portion of the trail, the geographical restrictions of the gorge prevent snowmachine users from crossing Glacier Creek on the INHT. Keeping the Winner Creek Trail nonmotorized would protect values of quiet, solitude, air quality, uninterrupted cross-country skiing, safety, and views of pristine landscapes. The upper Winner Creek section and the Crow Pass trail traverse extensive severe avalanche terrain. Both of these trails are not proposed for any winter management because of these hazards.

Decision

Based upon my review of all alternatives, I have decided to implement Alternative 4 as described in the Seward to Girdwood INHT EA (June 2003) with minor modifications described below.

This decision includes the mitigation measures and design and implementation features associated with Alternative 4 (see EA pages 14-18). This decision approves:

- Approximately 186 miles to be managed as part of the INHT.
- Approximately 82 miles of trail reconstruction, 77 miles of new trail construction, of which 15 are over-snow only with no tread, the construction of 32 major² trail bridges (over 20 feet span), including a footbridge across Trail Lake at Moose Pass, and at least 50 minor bridges and boardwalks. This decision modifies Alternative 4 by including 6 bridges on the west side of Turnagain Pass, which have been analyzed with Alternative 3. These bridges would be designed to accommodate snow grooming equipment. In addition, this decision modifies Alternative 4 with a minor reroute of the trail. Approximately 1.5 miles of trail east of the Mile 12 hill area will be relocated. The new route will generally be within ½ mile of the original route. This minor reroute has been field verified and is a feasible and efficient route with similar effects because it is in the same general location that was considered in the effects analyses.
- Winter motorized use on approximately 105 miles of winter trail. This decision also separates winter motorized and nonmotorized uses to the extent possible and protects the values of quiet, solitude, air quality, uninterrupted nonmotorized recreation, safety, and views of pristine landscapes by reasonably regulating 81 miles of parallel alternative routes for nonmotorized use.
- Approximately 15 miles of winter trail over frozen lakes.
- Summer motorized use on approximately 6 miles of summer trail. Summer motorized use is prohibited on approximately 131 miles of summer trail.
- Approximately 3 miles of water trail over Portage Lake to be open to non-commercial canoe, kayak, or similar nonmotorized watercraft. Access points to Portage Lake would be at Bear Valley and Portage Pass and all boat use would be limited to along the north and east lakeshores. This decision modifies an existing closure to boat use on Portage Lake to allow this type of use.
- Appropriate protection, preservation and management of selected heritage resources on lands administered by the Chugach National Forest.
- Interpretive and informational signing at 36 INHT access trailheads and select heritage resource sites.
- The construction of five new trailheads and reconstruction of three existing trailheads. Locations of new trailheads include: Bear Lake Road; Granite Creek Recreation Area; Twentymile Valley; Girdwood; and Milepost 3.9 Crow Creek Road. Locations of existing trailheads include: Nash Road; west side of Ingram Creek; and east side of Ingram Creek. In addition, this decision modifies Alternative 4 by including an additional new trailhead at Milepost 2.9 Crow Creek Road. This new trailhead will be developed for year-round use and will provide parking for up to 20 vehicles and will include vault toilets and informational signing. Reviews from resource specialists have concluded that the addition of this trailhead would not add significant effects to resources (project file).
- The construction of up to six new cabins. Locations could include: Johnson Pass trail; Lost Lake/Primrose Trail; east side of Turnagain pass; flatlands in Twentymile; and Berry Pass. Cabin construction would consider historic design theme.

² A major bridge is defined as over 20 feet span.

- Moving forward with obtaining permanent easements across State of Alaska, Municipality of Anchorage, Kenai Peninsula Borough, and Alaska Railroad lands.

Rationale for Decision

In making my decision, I carefully reviewed the analysis that is documented in the EA. I also read and reviewed the substantive public and agency comments received during the 30-day EA comment period. I considered the range of views expressed. In addition, I attended two public hearings on the ANILCA issue and carefully reviewed and considered the comments made through public testimony. I reviewed the Comprehensive Plan and State of Alaska plans (Kenai Area Plan and Turnagain Arm Management Plan) that also address the INHT.

I base my decision on the analysis findings, the public responses, and other Agency plans. When compared to the other alternatives this alternative will provide a beneficial mix of resources and uses for the public within the framework of existing laws, regulations, policies, public needs and desires, and capabilities of the land, while meeting the stated purpose and need for the project. The criteria I used to evaluate the alternatives in making my decision are: 1) how well the alternatives meet the purpose and need; 2) how well the alternatives address the key issues; and 3) how well the alternatives meet the Forest Plan.

I compared the four alternatives against the purpose and need. Based on my review, I believe that Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 meet the purpose and need. Alternative 1 (No Action) does not meet the purpose and need because it would not implement selected Comprehensive Plan recommendations for a National Historic Trail within the Chugach National Forest boundary and connecting Seward to Girdwood at Crow Pass Trail. However, a No Action Alternative provides a baseline for estimating the effects of other Alternatives and is therefore analyzed in detail.

I then evaluated the alternatives on how they address the key issues identified during the scoping period. Section 1110 of ANILCA applies to all of the action alternatives; however, each alternative varies the amount of trail proposed to be used by snowmachine users. The effect on snowmachine use for traditional activities therefore varies by alternative. Alternative 3 addresses this issue by amending the Forest Plan and opening all routes of the INHT on National Forest System land to snowmachine use. In Alternative 2, approximately 76 miles of trail would be open to winter motorized use. Alternative 2 provides for reasonable regulation of snowmachine use for the protection of the natural and other values of the INHT on an additional 71 miles of parallel alternative routes for nonmotorized use. Snowmachine use for traditional activities during periods of adequate snow cover would need to be prohibited on approximately 8 miles based on a finding that such use is detrimental to resource values. In Alternative 4, approximately 105 miles would be open to winter motorized use. Alternative 4 provides for reasonable regulation of snowmachine use for the protection of the natural and other values of the INHT on 81 miles of parallel alternative routes for nonmotorized use. Please refer to the section above called **Management Considerations of Alternative Routes** for details on these alternative routes and how they would be managed under ANILCA Section 1110(a).

I next compared the alternatives on how well they addressed the inter-related issue of potential conflicts between motorized and nonmotorized recreation users. In comparing the alternatives, I believe that Alternative 3 does not adequately address this issue. It does not provide any winter nonmotorized segments on National Forest System land. Potential conflicts would increase because there are no separate trails for motorized and nonmotorized recreation users. For those reasons, I no longer considered Alternative 3 in my decision. Alternatives 2 and 4 address this

issue by providing a mix of winter motorized and nonmotorized routes while at the same time meeting the requirements of ANILCA. In comparing Alternatives 2 and 4, I believe that Alternative 4 provides the most effective means of reducing potential user conflicts by separating winter motorized and nonmotorized users to the extent possible and protecting the values of quiet, solitude, air quality, uninterrupted nonmotorized recreation, safety, and views of pristine landscapes. I also heard from the public that having a continuous route open to snowmachines is important. Alternative 4 provides a continuous route open to snowmachines from Seward to Girdwood.

I extensively and carefully reviewed the information from the interdisciplinary team (IDT) about a nonmotorized alternative. The IDT looked at opportunities to develop a completely nonmotorized alternative but there were no feasible opportunities within direction set in the Forest Plan. Any reasonable nonmotorized route would go through areas that are currently open to snowmachine use. Additionally, a completely nonmotorized alternative would still need to meet the requirements of Section 1110 of ANILCA, which would require a finding of detriment to resource values to prohibit snowmachine use for traditional activities. Since the analysis for the revised Forest Plan recently showed that snowmachines were an appropriate use in some of these areas, we could not reasonably find that a detriment to resource values would occur in these areas with this project. In addition, the areas have traditionally included motorized uses, and much of the trail is along highways and railways. I believe that a completely nonmotorized alternative is not a reasonable alternative for these reasons.

Finally, I evaluated the alternatives to determine how well they meet the Forest Plan objectives. In comparing the alternatives, I find that Alternatives 2 and 4 accomplish the outcomes committed to in the Forest Plan without having to amend it. Alternative 3 requires a Forest Plan amendment to open routes to winter motorized use in areas where motorized use is currently closed. I believe the decisions made in the Forest Plan are appropriate, which is why I base this decision on direction set in the Forest Plan.

Based on my review, I have selected Alternative 4 with minor modifications because it 1) meets the purpose and need; 2) addresses the issue of the applicability of Section 1110 of ANILCA; 3) most effectively addresses the issue regarding potential conflicts between motorized and nonmotorized users; and 4) is consistent with Forest Plan direction.

Public Involvement

As described in the background, the need for this action arose when the National Trails Act designated the INHT. Since then, the 1986 Comprehensive Plan further developed the need for this action and provided guidelines for the protection, development and management of the Primary Route and Connecting Trails and for associated heritage resources along the entire length of the INHT. A proposal to re-establish the Seward to Girdwood INHT has been listed in the Chugach National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) quarterly publications since April 2001. The SOPA is sent out to approximately 300 people. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping from November 26, 2002 to December 27, 2002.

The availability of the EA for public review and notice of 30-day public comment period was advertised in the Anchorage Daily News in July 2003. The EA was mailed to approximately 50 interested parties and organizations and an email with a link to the EA was sent to another 97 people. The EA was also available at the Seward District office, the Glacier District Office in

Girdwood and the Supervisor's Office in Anchorage. Comments were received from 39 individuals, organizations, and agencies. Responses to comments are documented in Appendix A.

Due to the conflict with the requirements of ANILCA Section 1110 and the potential to prohibit snowmachine use on these routes, we gave public notice and conducted two hearings in the vicinity of the affected area; December 4, 2003 at Girdwood and December 6, 2003 at Moose Pass. The public notice was published in the Anchorage Daily News, Seward Phoenix Log, and the Turnagain Times. We collected public testimony related to snowmachine use for traditional activities, potential access restrictions, the possible prohibition of snowmachine use, and whether such use for traditional activities is detrimental to resource values. The deadline for public testimony was December 15, 2003. Seventeen people presented oral testimony at the hearings. In addition, we received written testimony from 25 individuals, organizations, and agencies. All public testimony has been posted on our website at: www.fs.fed.us/r10/chugach.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

Context:

The selected alternative applies to a project limited in scope and duration. The proposed action consists of managing approximately 186 miles as part of the INHT. The project is part of the over 2,000 mile long INHT system as identified in the Comprehensive Plan. The 186 miles of trail managed as part of the Seward to Girdwood INHT, is only a small portion of the entire INHT system.

Of the 186 miles of trail, approximately 44% (82 miles) consists of reconstructing existing trails. New trail construction would occur on only 77 miles, of which 15 miles are over-snow trails with no tread. The remaining 25 miles include winter trails over frozen lakes, water trail, and existing trails with no reconstruction proposed.

Approximately 54 miles (70 %) of the new trail construction are within approximately 1 mile of a highway or railroad. Any additional traffic or activity associated with the trail is within an existing heavily used traffic corridor.

Intensity:

1. My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action.
2. Public health and safety are minimally affected by the proposed actions. Potential impacts to health from snowmachine emissions have been addressed in the Response to Comments (Appendix A). Other safety concerns related to winter trails shared by motorized and nonmotorized users have been analyzed in the EA and in the recreation specialist report (project record). Specifically, Alternative 4 helps to minimize some of these concerns by developing or managing the greatest miles of trail to separate winter motorized users from nonmotorized users (see EA pages 24-25).

3. There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area. There are many cultural resources associated with this project. However, the analysis in the EA shows that the proposed actions would have positive effects for some sites, no effect on some sites, and would mitigate potential adverse effects (see EA page 30). Wetlands and floodplains exist in the project area but would not be significantly impacted (see EA pages 15 and 30-32). The proposed actions go through roadless areas; however, no road building is proposed that would alter the roadless character. Rivers that are eligible for the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System occur in the area and fall under a wild, scenic, or recreational river management area in the revised Forest Plan. Proposed actions are consistent with management area direction. There are no park lands or prime farmlands within the affected area.
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. The concerns expressed during the comment period on the EA have been fully addressed in the Response to Comments (Appendix A).
5. The possible effects on the human environment are not highly uncertain, nor do they involve unique or unknown risks. Estimates were made about possible future uses of the INHT to fully disclose the potential effects. These potential effects are discussed in the Response to Comments (Appendix A) and also in the Environmental Consequences section of the EA.
6. This action is unique because there are no other National Historic Trails on the Chugach National Forest. Therefore, this action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions on the Chugach National Forest with significant effects.
7. The cumulative impacts are not significant (see EA pages 21-39).
8. The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Effects to cultural resources are fully disclosed in the EA (pages 29-30) and in the cultural resources specialist report (project record). The analysis in the EA shows that the proposed actions would have positive effects for some sites, no effect on some sites, and would mitigate potential adverse effects (see EA page 30).
9. The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (EA pages 32-36, and the biological evaluation, available in the project record)
10. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA (see EA pages 39-41). The action is consistent with the Chugach Land and Resource Management Plan (See EA pages 2 and 39).

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

National Forest Management Act - This decision is consistent with the revised Chugach Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). The Forest Plan complies with all resource integration and management requirements of 36 CFR 219 (219.14 through 219.27). This decision is consistent with the intent of the forest plan's long term goals and objectives listed on pages 3-1 to 3-18. The project was designed in conformance with land and resource

management plan standards and incorporates appropriate land and resource management plan guidelines.

Endangered Species Act - Biological evaluations were completed for threatened, endangered, proposed, and sensitive plant and animal species. No threatened or endangered plant or animal species would be affected by this activity.

Bald Eagle Protection Act - Management activities within bald eagle habitat will be in accordance to a Memorandum of Understanding between the Forest Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

ANILCA Section 810, Subsistence Evaluation and Finding - The effects of the activity have been evaluated to determine potential effects on subsistence opportunities and resources. There is no documented or reported subsistence use that would be restricted as a result of this decision. For this reason, none of the activities would result in a significant possibility of a significant restriction of subsistence use of wildlife, fish, or other foods.

Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972, as amended - The Coastal Zone Management Act requires the Forest Service, when conducting or authorizing activities or undertaking development directly affecting the coastal zone, to ensure that the activities or development be consistent with the approved Alaska Coastal Management program to the maximum extent practicable. I have determined that the proposed activities are consistent with the Alaska Coastal Management Program and the Juneau Coastal Management Plan to the maximum extent practicable.

Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1976, as amended - The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation Act (the Act) requires that all federal agencies consult with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) when any project "may adversely affect" essential fish habitat (EFH). The Act also requires that agencies with existing consultation processes contact NMFS to discuss how the existing processes can be used to satisfy the EFH consultation requirements (50 CFR 600.920(e)(3)). None of the activities will cause any action that may adversely affect EFH as defined by this Act.

National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 – Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires that all federal undertakings follow the regulations found at 36 CFR 800 to identify and protect cultural resources that are within project areas and which may be effected by projects. The Chugach National Forest will follow the procedures in the Programmatic Agreement among the Chugach National Forest, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Alaska State Historic Preservation Officer regarding management of the INHT and its associated historic properties.

Executive Order 11988 - Wetlands - Wetlands occur in the project area. Measures, such as the implementation of Best Management Practices, will be taken to minimize the impact to wetlands in accordance with E.O. 11988.

Executive Order 11990 - Floodplains - Floodplains occur in the project area. Measures, such as the implementation of Best Management Practices, will be taken to minimize the impact to floodplains in accordance with E.O. 11990.

Executive Order 12898 - Environmental Justice - Implementation of this project is not anticipated to cause disproportionate adverse human health or environmental effects to minority or low-income populations.

Executive Order 12962 - Recreational Fisheries - No major adverse effects to freshwater or marine resources would occur with implementation of this project.

Clean Water Act - The project design is in accordance with Forest Plan standards and guidelines, Best Management Practices, and applicable Forest Service manual and handbook direction. The project activities are expected to meet all applicable State of Alaska water quality standards.

Clean Air Act - Emissions anticipated from the implementation of the Action Alternative would be of short duration and would not be expected to exceed State of Alaska ambient air quality standards (18 AAC 50).

Executive Order 13112 - Invasive Species - Invasive species populations have the potential to spread in the project area. Where feasible, measures, such as cleaning equipment prior to entering NFS lands and use of weed-free materials in trail construction; would be taken to minimize the spread of invasive species in accordance with E.O. 13112.

Implementation

This project will be implemented in accordance with Forest Service Manual and Handbook direction, using Best Management Practices (BMP's), and according to the processes described in the EA. This direction provides a bridge between project planning and implementation and will ensure execution of the actions, environmental standards and mitigation approved by this decision and compliance with other laws.

Implementation may occur on, but not before, five business days from the close of the appeal filing period if no appeal is received. The appeal filing period closes 45 days after publication of legal notice of this decision in the Anchorage Daily News newspaper, published in Anchorage, Alaska. In the event an appeal is received, the decision may be implemented 15 days following disposition of the appeal.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to administrative review (appeal) pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215. Individuals or organizations that submitted substantive comments during the comment period specified at 215.6 may appeal this decision. The notice of appeal must be in writing, meet the appeal content requirements at 215.14 and be filed with the Appeal Deciding Officer:

Regional Forester, Alaska Region
USDA Forest Service
PO Box 21628
Juneau, AK 99802-1628
E-mail: appeals-alaska-regional-office@fs.fed.us

Anyone who appeals must provide the Regional Forester sufficient narrative evidence and argument to show why the decision by the Forest Supervisor should be remanded or reversed. At a minimum the notice of appeal must:

1. State that it is an appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.
2. List the name and address of the appellant and, if possible, a phone number.

3. Identify this decision, the Chugach National Forest "Seward to Girdwood Iditarod National Historic Trail", the date it was signed, and the decision maker, Joe L. Meade, Forest Supervisor.
4. Identify the change or changes in the decision that the appellant seeks, or the portion of the decision to which the appellant objects.
5. State how the decision fails to consider comments previously provided, either before or during the comment period specified in 36 CFR 215.6, and, if applicable, how the appellant believes the decision violates law, regulation, or policy.

The Notice of Appeal, including attachments, must be filed (regular mail, fax, e-mail, express delivery, or messenger service) with the Appeal Deciding Officer at the correct location within 45 calendar days of publication of the legal notice of this decision in the Anchorage Daily News, the newspaper of record for the Chugach National Forest. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Appeals submitted electronically, including attachments, must be in an electronic format compatible with Microsoft Word.

Hand delivered appeals will be accepted at the Regional Office, Federal Office Building, 709 W. 9th St. Juneau, AK during normal business hours (8:00 am through 4:30 pm) Monday through Friday, excluding holidays.

Implementation of decisions subject to appeal, pursuant to 36 CFR part 215, may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period.

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Contact

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Betty Charnon, Glacier Ranger District, P.O. Box 129, Girdwood, AK 99587, (907) 754-2326.

/s/ Joe L. Meade
JOE L. MEADE
Forest Supervisor
Chugach National Forest

January 23, 2004
Date

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